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A Conversation with Geoffrey Pleyers: The Battlefields of Latin American Struggles and the Challenges of the Internet for Social Change

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In this conversation, professor and leading scholar on global social movements and contemporary protest Geoffrey Pleyers maps and critically reflects on the main battlefields of Latin American struggles, from resistance over land dispossession and extractivism to conflicts over information control and the quality of democracy, from the battle against the neoliberal privatization of public education to the struggles for justice against impunity and violence. He then situates the role of digital media within a multifaceted scenario where powerful mainstream media and political elites are colluded, independent journalists are threatened and struggle to get their voice heard, and governments invest immense resources to spy on citizens and to influence public opinion. While recognizing the importance of the Internet to pursue social change in the Latin American context, Pleyers urges us to look at the broader social, political, and economic picture in order to understand the extent of the transformations on the continent.

Keywords: Latin America, extractivism, information, democracy, public education, impunity, social change

Introduction

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On May 8, 2015, I began a thought-provoking conversation with Geoffrey Pleyers on the main battlefield of Latin American struggles, the relevance of alternative journalism, and the quality of democracy in Latin America. Professor Pleyers holds a PhD from the Ecoles des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales of Paris, where he works with Alain Touraine. He is FNRS researcher and associate professor of sociology at the University of Louvain and the current president of Research Committee 47, Social Classes and Social Movements, of the International Sociological Association (ISA). Pleyers has conducted extensive fieldwork on social movements in Mexico, since 2002, and in Ecuador, Brazil, Chile, and Colombia. He is a regular visiting fellow and invited professor at universities in Latin America and a member of the editorial committee of seven scholarly journals in Mexico, Costa Rica, Colombia, and Chile. In January 2009, together with Professor Sergio Tamayo of the Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana (Mexico), he launched the Mexican Network of Social Movement Studies, which gathers researchers from more than 30 universities. He is the editor of *Movimientos sociales: De lo local a lo global (Social Movements: From the Local to the Global, 2010, Mexico: Anthropos)* and coeditor of *Open Movements: For a Global and Public Sociology*, a joint project of openDemocracy and the International Sociological Association Research Committee 47, Social Classes and Social Movements (ISA47), with the support of the Institute of Social and Political Studies at the State University of Rio de Janeiro (IESP-UERJ) and the Collège d'études Mondiales (Paris), which invites leading social scientists to share their research results and perspectives on contemporary social struggles.² Moreover, he is the author of *Alter-Globalization: Becoming Actors in the Global Age* (2010, Cambridge, UK: Polity Press).

Based on his broad experience as a social movements scholar especially in the Latin American context, in the course of our conversation, Pleyers is able to chart the main battlegrounds of resistance in Latin America, drawing on examples and experiences from several countries, establishing connections with the concerns of other similar global movements and to relevant sociological topics. Moreover, he brings a critical perspective on the role of the Internet and social media that, while recognizing the contributions of digital media to social change on the continent, also stresses the issues that plagued contemporary protests that rely on social media, and he inserts digital communication technologies into broader sociocultural and economic contexts.

Mapping the Battlefields of Latin American Struggles: Land, Information, Education, and Justice

Emiliano Treré:

Hi, Geoffrey. In the last years, you have travelled and worked for various periods in Brazil, Chile, Mexico, and Colombia. So I would like to ask you to try to draw a typology of social movements in Latin America and to speak about the main battlegrounds and forms of resistance that you see across Latin America.

Geoffrey Pleyers:

² <https://www.opendemocracy.net/breno-bringel-geoffrey-pleyers/openmovements-social-movements-global-outlooks-and-public-sociologist>

Hi, Emiliano. Thanks for this interesting question. Well, Latin America has always been a very lively continent, with important and often innovative social movements. At the same time, the continent is now deeply integrated in the economic and cultural globalization. The struggles and movements in Latin America are thus both specific to the continent and parts of global struggles, and thus significant much beyond the continent. For what I could read, see, and learn during my recent stays in Latin America, four types of movements are currently particularly lively and significant: indigenous and peasant movements, with the struggles over land becoming increasingly tense; democratization movements, where information and the collusion between political, economic, and media elites are major challenges; struggles for education by students and teachers and rural movements' initiatives; and finally movements for peace with justice, against violence and impunity.

Emiliano Treré:

OK, so let's start with a brief illustration of Latin American indigenous and peasant movements.

Geoffrey Pleyers:

Yes, these movements have had major impacts in various countries of the continent since 1992. The Zapatista struggle in south Mexico has had a global echo and has inspired movements across the world. In Ecuador and Bolivia, indigenous movements contributed to shift political power at the national level, even if in Ecuador Correa's government started to repress these movements a few years later. More than in these political shifts, the main contributions of indigenous movements lie in their explorations of alternative democratic models based on local autonomy and horizontal processes, the defense of local territories, and the promotion of alternative *cosmovisions*.³ The defense of nature, and in particular of their local territory, is a major struggle at a time when most Latin American governments have strengthened the exports of commodities and food to insert their economies into global markets. Indigenous people, small peasants, and rural communities are at the frontline of the opposition to land-grabbing, mining, and other "extractivist" industries.⁴ Peasant and indigenous movements provide us with an excellent illustration of the fact that, contrary to a significant part of the scholarly literature, social movements are not only—and I would even say not mainly—about protest. Social movements contest the dominant culture and economic system by proposing alternative worldviews and values and implementing emancipatory perspectives in concrete practices. Across Latin America, peasant movements have shown that a family farm model is not only economically sounds but may also bring major contributions to some global challenges of the 21st century, including climate change and food security. Some indigenous movements have implemented alternative political and social organization based on local autonomy and participation.

Emiliano Treré:

³ *Cosmovision* is intended here as the set of beliefs and opinions that conform to the image or the general concept of the world that a culture have in a determined epoch. It is a concept similar to worldview, or the German *Weltanschauung*. According to the cosmovisions of many indigenous people, nature and Mother Earth are sacred living beings and have to be respected as such.

⁴ For a clarification of the term "extractivism," please see http://wiki.elearning.uni-bielefeld.de/wikifarm/fields/ges_cias/field.php/Main/Unterkapitel53

Yes, and this aspect connects to the so-called cosmovisions you recalled before. Can you elaborate more on that?

Geoffrey Pleyers:

These movements have revisited traditional cosmovisions to propose alternative perspectives of what happiness and a “good living”⁵ means, challenging the Western development model. Latin American indigenous and small farmers’ cosmovisions and local democratic organizations have become major references and sources of inspiration for progressive citizens around the world who care about climate change, an existence in harmony with the environment, and a fairer and more democratic world (Pleyers, 2015). This represents a considerable shift: During all the 20th century, these people were considered as just “leftovers” of modernity and are now regarded as providing major insights on major global challenges.

Emiliano Treré:

What about the second element of the typology, democratization movements?

Geoffrey Pleyers:

The second typology of Latin American movements is also globally connected but in a different way: We are talking about the 2010s’ democratization movements, such as the Arab revolutions, the 15M movement in Spain, Occupy, and a range of other movements and protests in Latin America, where citizens ask for a deeper and more extended democracy. The June 2013 protests in Brazil were massive, but the struggle for a better and deeper democracy was also a major dimension of the 2011 student movements in Colombia and Chile and many other mobilizations, and is also embodied by countless small networks of activists. A new generation of progressive citizens and activists want more from democracy than just relatively fair elections and believe in more participatory forms of democracy and horizontal ways of organizing citizens and civil society. They also point to some major threats of democracy in the 21st century. A battlefield that appears as particularly significant in these movements across the world and is even more challenging in Latin America is that of information and the threats that the collusion between political, economic, and media elites represents for democracy. Corruption scandals, even the massive ones like in Mexico and Brazil, are just the tip of the iceberg. Social movements and citizens play a key role in denouncing this collusion [of] political, economic, and media elites that, in some countries, has almost destroyed democracy. The Mexican movement #YoSoy132 of which you, Emiliano, are one of the top specialists, is a good example of this aspect. The collusion between political and media elite is so deep and the power of television so strong that for these young activists, it made more sense to march towards the headquarters of the Mexican media corporation Televisa than towards the presidential palace. Likewise, during the 2013 protest in Sao Paulo, several protest marches and action were directed to the headquarters of Globo, the main media corporation in Brazil.

Emiliano Treré:

⁵ “Good living” is the translation of the Latin American concept of *buen vivir*. For a discussion of the concept in English, see https://www.boell.de/sites/default/files/Buen_Vivir_engl.pdf. For a discussion in Spanish, see <http://www.scielo.org.co/pdf/pacla/v18n1/v18n1a03.pdf>

That is a very relevant reflection for the purpose of our special issue. Do you think the control of information and the media is a major battlefield in Latin America, and can you articulate more this consideration?

Geoffrey Pleyers:

Sure, there is no doubt about that; it is a main battlefield. We shouldn't underestimate the power of a part of national elite in manufacturing consent and framing debates through mass media. In the case of Mexico, of course, there are some very strong signs to show how the new president, Enrique Peña Nieto, was himself "manufactured" by a media corporation, as shown by *The Guardian* that revealed the 500-million-pesos (some 50 million USD at that time) contract signed by Peña Nieto with Televisa to care for his image in 2005–2006.⁶ The way information on the armed conflict, social movements, and education politics are framed by the main mass media is also a major problem in Colombia, while in other countries voices that are opposed to the government have no access to the media. On the other side, social media and websites have been massively appropriated by citizens and activists. This point illustrates another key feature of social movements in our time. Today, social movements are sometimes made highly visible by mass protests on the streets and clearly identified organizations or networks. Most of them are, however, embodied by loose and little visible networks, by small groups of citizens and flows of individual practices, both online and in daily life. To publish analysis on a blog, to diffuse information about police exactions, corruption cases, or disappeared students on a Facebook page is all part of a wide movement against the manufacturing of information by mass media that are, in some Latin American countries, colluded with political and economic elites. At the same time, these individual actions need to be collectively articulated to have an impact on society.

Emiliano Treré:

Then also the more traditional voices of independent journalism are active in the online sphere.

Geoffrey Pleyers:

Sure. We should also stress the major importance of more traditional actors, and in particular voices of independent journalism in mass media, like the weekly newspapers such as *Proceso*⁷ or Carmen Aristegui⁸ in Mexico or *Semana* in Colombia.⁹ In his book *The Life and Death of Democracy*, John Keane (2009) brilliantly shows that today, democracy works more thanks to actors who monitor governments and policy makers than through the debates in parliaments. Independent journalists are key actors in this respect and, in some cases, like in the state of Veracruz in Mexico, the last limits to the total power of political and economic elite colluded with drug cartels and that control information in mainstream media. This is why so many journalists and online activists are murdered in Mexico and in the northeast of Brazil and why they are constantly threatened in many other Latin American countries.

Emiliano Treré:

⁶<http://www.theguardian.com/world/interactive/2012/jun/08/mexico-media-scandal-televisa-pena-nieto-claims>

⁷ <http://www.proceso.com.mx/>

⁸ <http://aristeguinoicias.com/>

⁹ <http://www.semana.com/>

And then there are the struggles over public education. Can you talk to us about that?

Geoffrey Pleyers:

Yes, as I told you before, I think that a third and very connected battlefield across the continent is education. The student movement for the right to education is the most significant movement in Chile in the last decade. In Colombia, the 2011 student movement and the massive strike to defend public education did not get much international attention but were wide and important. They managed to get the president to withdraw the project of more privatization of education, which is significant even if the neoliberalization of higher education has continued to be carried out in “underground” ways. Like in Chile, students were also very creative and implemented innovative forms of action and ways to foster a dialogue in the whole society, with an alternative vision for the country, with projects for education, public goods, and a welfare state and peace with justice. While student mass protests usually get a fair media coverage, it is seldom the case of teachers’ movements that are often presented as corporatist movements focused on the defense of self-interest. Public schools’ teachers who bring education and democratic values in favelas, popular neighborhoods, and rural areas seldom get the recognition and salary they deserve, even if they play a fundamental role in the democratization of society. In Rio de Janeiro in 2013, the union of public school teachers also conducted the mass protest. Teachers also played the leading role in the 2006 popular movements in Oaxaca, Mexico, and it is not casual that the 43 young disappeared of Ayotzinapa¹⁰ were studying to become teachers in rural schools. Chile may be the best known case of this battle between opposite visions of education, that is, an expansive and elitist private education and a public model where education is considered as being one of the main factors of democratization, of access of everyone to an education and to critical perspectives. That’s exactly why Mujica, the former president of Uruguay,¹¹ has always indicated education to be his priority. Some rural movements also play an important role in this battle for a public, accessible, and critic education. In Chiapas, for instance, the Zapatistas have set up an alternative, bilingual education model. In Brazil, the Movimento dos Sem Terra builds schools in each of its settlements and provides education based on the Freirean principles.¹²

Emiliano Treré:

And then there’s justice, connected to the issues of violence and impunity of many Latin American countries.

Geoffrey Pleyers:

Yes, a fourth set of movements is constituted by those that fight for justice, against violence and impunity, and for human security. They range from mobilization for justice and memory after the dictatorships in Chile, Argentina, or Brazil to citizens’ initiatives to oppose violence and impunity in Mexico,

¹⁰ For an informed discussion of the Ayotzinapa case in English, see Goldman’s series on the missing students from the Ayotzinapa Normal School in *The New Yorker*: <http://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/the-missing-forty-three-the-governments-case-collapses>

¹¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jos%C3%A9_Mujica

¹² For a basic lesson on the principles of the philosophy of education of Paulo Freire, see <http://www.freire.org/paulo-freire/concepts-used-by-paulo-freire>

Colombia, Guatemala, Venezuela, and Brazil. Significant campaigns and movements have risen in Mexico, to denounce violence, impunity, and more recently the collusion of the armed forces and some politicians with drug cartels as well as the exaction and extrajudicial execution by the army. Citizens and NGOs also play an important role in Colombia, where the public debate on security is very polarized. Across the continents, citizens and NGOs have documented exactions, challenging the ways through which the problem of violence is framed by the governments and by mainstream media and, in some cases, forming local citizens' groups to defend their villages or neighborhoods against both the drug cartels and military exaction, such as some groups of *autodefensas* [self-defense] in Mexico. Then, of course, other social "battlefields" are certainly important too, such as the struggles for a different economic model, less dominated by transnational corporations and free trade agreements, and a fairer wealth distribution (Latin America remains the most unequal continent). These four struggles are, however, the main frontlines for progressive movements today. They are deeply interconnected. For instance, a good education is a key element of democracy and allows citizens to get access to critical information, notably online. All these struggles are actually part of a common movement, a movement for real democracy in the 21st century.

A Critical Perspective on the Internet and Social Media in Latin America

Emiliano Treré:

You have stressed the importance of the Internet and of digital media to access information and to mobilize citizens. Given the focus of our special issue on digital media and Latin American struggles, could you develop your perspective on this point?

Geoffrey Pleyers:

Of course. Internet has opened many new spaces for citizens but also for alternative news, and independent news channels: With the Internet, so many people started spreading their own information, in contrast to the mainstream media colluded with political and economic power. I would say that we now have a much more balanced and critical perspective than 10 years ago on the impact of Internet and social media, because we recognize that what it's still dominating among the public opinion is still mostly what people hear on TV and not what they read on the Internet. There are two very different worlds in countries such as Mexico or Brazil, the world of those who watch the mainstream TV news and those who got their information online or from independent journalists. Activists and scholars tend to read independent or activists' media and their friends' posts on Facebook and social media and are shocked by a succession of political scandals. But most people live in a very different news environment, and at the end, the ruling party in Mexico still get millions of votes and win the 2015 elections. So Internet's importance may be growing, but at the same time I wouldn't underestimate the power of mainstream mass media and their ability of manufacturing consent today. The Internet is actually not only important for the "battlefield of information" I outlined before; it is significant on every battlefield. For example, an indigenous movement, the Zapatista movement, a locally rooted indigenous community in a remote part of Mexico was able to use Internet to connect to movements and citizens across the world, to become a global news, and to acquire a global meaning. Internet is definitely a major tool to connect this local scale and global meaning. More classic, alternative media have also played a key role for local movements, for example, the community radios, *La voz de los sin voz* [The Voice of the Voiceless] in the Zapatista movement. More generally, the contribution of the Internet should not be seen so much as on the Internet

per se but on how this space is combined with different and more classic media, for example, how the Internet is actually helping the diffusion of community radios in different parts of Brazil, or alternative media online, as *Proceso* in Mexico, *Semana* and *Palabras al Margen*¹³ in Colombia, and many others throughout all the continent.

Emiliano Treré:

It is very interesting to note that the main battlefields that you outlined are reflected on the themes and topics addressed in the special issue: land dispossession and expropriation of natural resources, the fight over education, and then we have the imbrications between media, governments, and political elites, which are really strong in different Latin American countries. Of course I'm well aware of the situation in Mexico, but also in other countries such as Brazil, and, as you said before, Colombia, Argentina, we have similar situations. Regarding the Internet, I agree that it is both, let's say, a battlefield in itself, and at the same time a tool, we can say, to fight for democracy and pluralism against these political, economical, and media elites. Then, as you argued, we should not overestimate its power, and secondly we should consider it in relation to broader activist media ecologies that include independent journalists, free and indigenous radios, alternative newspapers, and other multifaceted forms of communication.

Geoffrey Pleyers:

I would like to add two short points on the Internet. First, the Internet doesn't mean "denationalization," a global world without borders and nations. Of course it allows the information to circulate beyond borders, but most public spaces are still deeply national, and the main arena in which social movements struggle is also often national. Many movements that started online, like #YoSoy132 in Mexico, are focused on the national level. The massive use of Internet by activists hasn't led to a "denationalization" of movements and struggles. The second point is more worrying. The enthusiasm for Internet may have led many to overestimate the fact that Internet provides a space that escaped repressive and authoritarian governments. Well, governments are also online. Governments play actually on the two sides of the game of online communication. On one side, some states try to control, censor, and limit online environments. They use it to spy [on] citizens, companies, and other states. On the other side, many governments massively invest in social media and the Internet as a news channel. They have resources and are thus influential actors of the online arenas. Many Latin American governments are taking much care of their image online. They have hired squads of young Internet curators, manufacturing consent or actually transforming information into propaganda sometimes. For example, these teams create various user profiles in social media and online forums to dash people or journalists that criticize their politics. These points suggest that we should direct more attention towards the interplay of online and offline actions and media in our understanding of institutional politics and social movements.

Emiliano Treré:

Thank you very much for this stimulating conversation, Geoffrey. I believe that our dialogue has helped us first of all to map and critically reflect on the main battlefields of Latin American struggles such as resistance over land dispossession and extractivism, conflicts over media ownership and the quality of democracy, the battle against the neoliberal privatization of public education, and the struggles for justice

¹³ <http://palabrasalmargen.com/>

against impunity and violence. Then, I think that your reflections on the role of the Internet provide an interesting counterpoint to the considerations provided in the other conversation I had with Bernardo Gutiérrez included in the special issue. I do not intend that you two represent the poles of the debate on the impact of digital technologies within social mobilizations, with you being the cyberskeptic and he being the cyberenthusiast: That would be too simplistic. I believe instead that you complement yourselves. While he stressed the significance of digital media technologies in advancing technopolitical changes, you recognize that these changes have to be inserted in a complex scenario, where mainstream media and political elites are colluded, where independent journalists struggle to get their voice heard—because most of the population still “live” in the analog sphere dominated by the discourses of traditional media—and where governments have immense resources to spy [on] and control citizens and to influence public opinion. Hence, I believe that Gutiérrez’s fine-tuned analysis of the contributions of technopolitics, together with your balanced thoughts on the battlefields of information in Latin America, provide our readers with a crucial set of resources to navigate the Latin American resistance scenario.

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